

## June 14<sup>th</sup> message

One thing I learned many years ago is how Bible scholars have long concluded the gospel of Matthew was written primarily to Jewish Christians, emphasizing Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. It traces his genealogy back to Abraham and King David often citing Hebrew Scriptures to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled that prophecy.

So when we read the gospel reading today, the first Jewish readers would have been quite familiar with the reference to wolves. Jeremiah and Ezekiel have several references to wolves often comparing them to the royalty of the day. Even the small book of the minor prophet, Zephaniah, refers to the state of Israel under terrible leadership this way in chapter 3 verse 3; “Her officials within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. Her prophets are wanton, faithless men.”

Yet these words are just as relevant today for us as they were for these first listeners. Sometimes we hear the phrase, “so and so is a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Most know what it means. The shepherds at the time of Christ and possibly to this day would wear garments made of sheepskin with the skin on the outside and the fleece on the inside. This helped the flock to get accustomed to his presence. Trust would develop and the true shepherd would take care of this sheep. Jesus tells how you can tell the difference. You will know by their fruits. False prophets spoke what people wanted to hear claiming it was God’s message. True prophets often upset those in charge and the common folks because the true word of God meant turning from their sinful ways.

During the times of the prophets mentioned before the people pretended to worship God and had become complacent about their lifestyles that had adopted many pagan practices. The same could be said of today. False prophets come in many forms but one can tell by the fruits they display. Through careful consideration and prayer we can see through the wolves in sheep’s clothing today. Nearly all false prophets are motivated by money, fame, or power. We must be wise to their ways.

In the Bible study series I go to often by Barclay, he identifies several of characteristics of those who would lead one astray. I was really surprised at all the things he brings up. Here is a summary: 1) False prophets are filled with self-interest. They care first and foremost about themselves. This may involve teaching the word of God, but with the motivation of what they can get out of it. At the time of Christ, the Rabbis or Jewish teachers were expected to have a trade to earn a living and were not paid for their teaching.

While many things have changed, we still see much of this today. We see churches filled with volunteers, giving of their time and talents in teaching and other duties. I have never met a preacher who is in the ministry for the money. But I also know of times when some may look at their salaries and conclude they are getting paid very well without taking into account their education and work load. Again, one has to look at their fruits or what their work produces. I have known a situation where a pastor went into the ministry to please his mother, another because it seemed like a good occupation. Neither one made a career of it. They did not last because they were not good shepherds. One person I knew, who knew very little about the ministry saw through one of the folks I just mentioned and commented even he knew the work of a pastor is a calling, not just a job.

The second area he identifies is where the word of God is distorted to fit one's agenda. This can be very difficult to discern at times. The Bible teaches us many things. One can get caught up in one or two areas and focus entirely on those. I have spoken with folks who could not understand why the preacher kept emphasizing speaking in tongues. The person finally concluded he did not have that gift and he had others just as significant. Other ministers may have be very concerned about one or two aspects of the gospel and focus all their time and energy on those. The most effective prophets are those who are good shepherds to the needs of the congregation, the area he/she serves, and all the Good News. This involves sharing the word of God and helping folks to live it. It involves working through sometimes difficult situations to share the grace of God with others.

Next, Barclay mentions how false prophets focus on appearances instead of love for God and neighbor. This is what Jesus often saw with the Scribes and Pharisees. They were only concerned with the observance of ceremonial law. They spent much time discussing the many rules and regulations they had made concerning the Sabbath. They did not care about the ordinary Jews of the day and the burden all their interpretations of the law put on them.

Unfortunately that still happens today on a small scale. Some go and/or give to a church and it stops there. Their lives do not always reflect Christian values. Then unchurched folks see this and conclude that all those who are Christians are hypocrites based on one or two observations. People are always observing those of us who profess to be followers of Christ. What we have learned and continue to learn about how we should follow Christ needs to be internalized in all we do.

And finally, a true prophet teaches that true Christianity involves being active in the world. This being said, we must always remember Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." We must be active in the world putting our faith into action. We look at the ministry of Jesus and we see how He reached out to all kinds of people. He demonstrated how one is supposed to live.

This is the challenge for us today. False prophets come in many forms and in different walks of life. These verses remind us how to see through these disguises and follow those bear good fruit.

The special music we had speaks to that. "They'll Know We Are Christians" is a relatively recent hymn that was written in the 1960's. It is based on John 13:35: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is what our world so desperately needs. This is our call, not to be led astray by the false prophets of our day. May we, by the grace of God, live up to this calling. Amen.